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SIPDIS

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS; GENEVA FOR RMA

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SUBJECT: CAMBODIA: SRP'S INTERNAL REFORM EFFORTS

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Senior SRP officials recently discussed the challenges of reforming the Sam Rainsy Party, touching on internal elections of party leaders at the grassroots level, intraparty strife, the former Secretary General and Sam Rainsy's lack of consultation with the SRP's steering committee on major decisions. They also discussed the challenge the SRP faces as an opposition party in light of the political shifts of the last month. End Summary.

SRP's Efforts to Reform the Party

¶2. (SBU) Emboffs met with senior SRP officials Son Chhay on March 15 and Mu Sochua on March 16 to discuss the SRP's efforts at internal party reform. The party is trying to reform, but it is sometimes finding it difficult. Son Chhay cited the incident in Prey Veng province on March 12, where a proposal to conduct local SRP elections caused a disagreement between party leaders. Local SRP staff tried to hold party elections in three villages, but Prey Veng National Assembly MP Chea Poch did not want the elections to go forward until all villages in the district had completed voter registration. Ang Sokhnao, a long-time competitor with Chea Poch, advised that the election should proceed as planned as the three villages in question had already completed their registration process; the SRP trainer who had come to conduct the elections agreed. Chea Poch's supporters were able to cause enough disruption that only two of the three villages held the elections, and one of those only had a 50 percent turnout of registered SRP voters.

¶3. (SBU) Mu Sochua, on the other hand, recently returned from a monitoring trip covering Battambang and Pursat provinces, where SRP local elections reportedly went smoothly. She said that no incidents took place similar to what transpired in Prey Veng, and SRP voters were very enthusiastic about the local reforms and party leader Sam Rainy's return. She is optimistic from what she has seen that SRP is gaining new voters from both the CPP and FUNCINPEC. In Battambang, for instance, she said party registration was up 25 percent. Some voters brought their former CPP registration cards as evidence of their previous party affiliation. Land issues appeared to be a primary source of discontent and reason for switching parties.

¶4. (SBU) According to Son Chhay, however, the party has not really accepted reforms. He referred to former Secretary General Eng Chhay Eang, who was removed by the SRP Steering Committee in December because of corruption and gambling problems, as one person who has tried to undermine reform efforts. When IRI outlined a reform program agenda to the SRP, Eng Chhay Eang selected only those proposed reforms that he thought he could manipulate to his advantage, said Son

Chhay. Son Chhay added that Eng Chhay Eang has not really distanced himself from his old responsibilities as Secretary General, and continues to act as though he is managing the party. He added that Sam Rainsy would like Eng Chhay Eang to remain as Secretary General, but that the steering committee adamantly opposed Sam Rainsy on that score. Son Chhay said Sam Rainsy rejected a proposal to appoint a new Secretary General, saying it could wait until the party congress in December.

¶ 15. (SBU) Son Chhay mentioned that he disagrees with Rainsy on some key issues. He referred to Rainsy's proposal to change the Constitution to the 50 percent plus one rule, and said that Rainsy told him about this only after he had already sent the proposal to Hun Sen. If he had seen the letter before, Son Chhay said, he would have told him not to send it. The issue of 50 percent plus one is more complex than a single article in the Constitution, said Son Chhay, and required further legal consideration. That said, Son Chhay noted that the 50 percent plus one now puts all the pressure on the CPP. If reforms are not completed as promised, Hun Sen and the CPP can no longer blame FUNCINPEC and the two-thirds rule; from now on, it's either the CPP's gain or their defeat. Son Chhay also disagrees with Sam Rainsy's proposal to create the National Authority for resolving land disputes. He said it is not the opposition's role to help the government. The opposition should point out what the government is doing wrong, and if the opposition agrees to work with the government on a solution, they can be easily blamed if it fails.

¶ 16. (SBU) Comment: SRP's commitment to reform is strong but clearly not universally held within the party. We believe, however, the Prey Veng case is an isolated instance where individual officials like Chea Poch are concerned that a

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reformed SRP will not support their candidacies as MPs in the future; similar cases may arise as the reform program goes forward. The road to reforming the SRP will go forward but may have more bumps along the way. Finally, it is too soon to judge how much popular discontent with the government over land grabbing and corruption will benefit SRP's voter registration drive and future election results, but SRP officials like Mu Sochua are optimistic based on what they are seeing in the field thus far. End Comment.
Mussomeli